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WALL STREET JOURNAL
28 March 1986

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 22

Give Up on Public Broadcasting

By Reed Irvine

Five years into the Reagan administration, the conservative revolution has barely touched the public broadcasting establishment. When even the executive editor of the New York Times acknowledges that his paper had drifted off to the left and needs to be steered back to a more centrist course, why has there been no similar move in public broadcasting, whose tilt makes the New York Times appear right wing by comparison?

When Congress created the Corporation for Public Broadcasting in 1967 as a funnel for the federal funds that were supposed to be used to produce quality programming that the private broadcasters could not be expected to supply, it tried to insure that the money would not be used for partisan or propaganda programs. The CPB was to be run by a bipartisan board, whose members were appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate. They were given staggered terms, preventing a new president from putting all his own people on the board as soon as he took office. It took Ronald Reagan four years to appoint a majority of the board members, and not all his appointees shared his conservative views.

Public Now Has Varied Menu

Mr. Reagan largely ignored the advice of his transition team on public broadcasting. It asserted that federal funding of broadcast programming was no longer necessary to provide the public with a more varied menu. The advent of cable, back-yard dishes and videocassettes has radically increased the availability of news, entertainment and educational programs to the general public. For news junkies, we now have Ted Turner's Cable News Network providing news all hours of the day. For public-affairs junkies, C-SPAN offers not only the proceedings of the House and many of its committees, but also a wealth of conferences, speeches, and even a nationwide call-in talk show.

In these two areas, the private sector has far outdistanced the offerings of public television with all of its government funding, about $400 million a year. There is no reason to believe that the private sector could not adequately supply the public's appetite for drama and documentaries without dependence on public funding. Corporate financing of high-brow programs distributed by the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) is already a fact of life, and this would doubtless continue even if federal funding were eliminated.

The Reagan administration is now trying to phase down federal funding of public broadcasting. It seeks to cut the fiscal 1988 appropriation for CPB from the $214 million already passed by Congress to $170 million, and it projects a cut to $90 million in fiscal year 1990. Congress, however, has something else in mind. In the omnibus budget bill just passed by Congress, the authorization for CPB has been increased, rising to $254 million in FY 1990.

This reflects the strong support of key committee chairmen for public broadcasting and the indifference of most members of Congress. The public broadcasting bureaucracy has been effective in mobilizing its small but vocal constituency to oppose efforts to curtail either its budget or its left-wing tendencies. It has had strong support from Sharon Percy Rockefeller, a liberal, who served as chairman of CPB for two terms, the second one as a Reagan appointee. Mrs. Rockefeller still serves on the CPB board, although she has been replaced as chairman by Reaganite Sonia Landau. As the daughter of a former senator, the wife of a sitting senator and a close friend of Sen. Barry Goldwater, chairman of a subcommittee that oversees public broadcasting, Mrs. Rockefeller has been a potent force in insulating CPB from the impact of the Reagan revolution.

Many in the liberal media have been quick to echo the cry of "politicization" whenever conservatives have made an effort to exercise some degree of control over public broadcasting. The truth is that the public broadcasting bureaucracy has long been highly politicized. PBS, which acquires, schedules and transmits much of the programming used by 313 noncommercial TV stations in the U.S. and its territories, has always shown a pronounced bias. This has been evidenced in the many far-left documentaries that it has not only aired but even commended to the stations, the most recent being a program denigrating the anti-communist rebels in Nicaragua and their U.S. supporters. This was aired on the eve of last week's House vote on aid to the freedom fighters.

We haven't traveled far from the night, in 1980, when PBS devoted three hours to a vicious anti-CIA documentary narrated by the notorious Philip Agee, a former CIA agent who has worked hand-in-glove with Soviet-Bloc intelligence for many years to identify publicly CIA agents overseas. Barry Chase, now vice president for news and public-affairs programming at PBS, commended this disinformation film to the stations, describing it as "a highly responsible overview of the CIA's history." The following year, PBS dipped into its special-events fund to rush onto the air "El Salvador: Another Vietnam?" The question mark was superfluous and the reason for the hurry was to get it aired while the communist-led guerrillas in El Salvador were carrying out what they called their "final offensive."

While PBS has also offered programs from the conservative side, such as Bill Buckley's "Firing Line" and Milton Friedman's series, "Free to Choose," these essentially have filled the same role as the occasional conservative commentator on National Public Radio. They are tokens that can be cited to disarm critics.

The entire public broadcasting bureaucracy is so insulated from the market, from public opinion and even from the legislators who vote its funding that there is little chance that it will be depoliticized as long as the funding continues to flow with no strings attached. The 10-member CPB board has been stripped of its power to influence programming decisions. Sharon Percy Rockefeller & Co. took care of that with a bylaws change while they still held power. The present chairman, Sonia Landau, has said that the policy when she joined the board was that directors should not even mention programs by name. She says that directors are discouraged from asking questions "because once you start asking, everybody starts hollering, 'Heat shield! You're interfering in the process.' "

The staff wants the board to serve as a "heat shield" to ward off criticism and external influence, not to give it direction. About a fifth of CPB's budget is allocated to direct grants for the production and distribution of television programs, grants largely decided upon by staff-selected panels, with zero input from the board. About three-fifths of the budget is used for grants to public television and radio stations, which use part of it to pay for the programs provided to them by PBS and NPR, free of any influence from the CPB board.

New President 'Educated'

The PBS board has an unwieldy membership of 35, mostly representatives of public TV stations. There are no representatives of the taxpayers or other major providers of funding. The board elects the president of PBS, and the White House and Congress have no voice in his selection. The entrenched bureaucracy, whose strong leanings are demonstrated by its programming decisions, appears to have successfully co-opted Bruce L. Christensen, the new president appointed in 1984, who had briefly shown promise of ventilating the premises. In June 1985, PBS aired Accuracy in Media's documentary response to the $5.6 million Vietnam series the network had previously broadcast, and leftists were infuriated. Six months later Mr. Christensen had been "educated," and he meekly went along with his staff's refusal to air a second AIM Vietnam critique, looking at press coverage during the war.

Through more than five years of the Reagan administration, it has grown increasingly obvious that the public-broadcasting establishment cannot be depoliticized. With the era of Gramm-Rudman and forced fiscal discipline now at hand, the time is ripe to follow the old advice of the Reagan transition team and defund the left-wing bureaucracy that has made public broadcasting its private playpen.

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